

A Connoisseur of the Breath

November 25, 2007

The term “mindfulness” on its own is something neutral. It can be put to good uses or bad uses—because all it means is keeping something in mind. You can keep in mind the fact that you want to put an end to suffering, or you can keep in mind a decision to rob a bank. And in either case, it’s mindfulness. So mindfulness becomes right or wrong depending on the task to which you apply it. There is such a thing as wrong mindfulness, keeping the wrong things in mind.

So as we’re practicing, we want to make sure our mindfulness is right mindfulness. There are two spots in the Canon where the Buddha defines it. The best known definition is in terms of the four establishings of mindfulness. In fact, there are two huge discourses on the topic. But it’s also good to keep in mind that there’s another definition of right mindfulness, a lot simpler. It’s simply keeping in mind the fact that you want to develop the skillful qualities of the path and to abandon their antitheses. In other words, you want to keep in mind the fact that you want to develop right view and abandon wrong view, to develop right resolve and abandon wrong resolve, and so on with all the factors of the path. What this means is that you’re not just observing without preference whatever comes up. You’re keeping in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities you want to develop and unskillful qualities you want to abandon.

When you keep that fact in mind and then apply it to what you’re doing, that’s right mindfulness combined with right effort. And it’s important to keep this context in mind. Sometimes you see people taking the teachings on the establishings of mindfulness out of context, saying that right effort and right concentration are one sort of practice, whereas right mindfulness is something else entirely. But right mindfulness actually builds on right effort, the effort to develop skillful things, the desire to develop skillful qualities of the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. And you just keep that in mind. To keep that in mind, you’ve got to establish mindfulness to give yourself a framework so that it will lead to right concentration.

So as we’re practicing mindfulness, remember the context. We try to develop a skillful understanding of what’s skillful and what’s not in the mind—that’s right view—and we give rise to the desire to develop what’s skillful, to abandon what’s not: That’s right effort. And now we’re going to keep that in mind. The best way to remember something is to have a good solid framework, a good solid foundation, a good frame of reference, which is where the establishings of

mindfulness come in.

Sometimes you hear these listed simply as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. But actually, the establishing of mindfulness is a whole process. You try to remain focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the process we're working on here as we're focused on the breath. It's the first of the establishing.

To remain focused is termed *anupassana* in Pali. You choose something that you're going to watch and then you stick with it—in this case, the body in and of itself. In other words, you're not looking at the body as part of the world or however it might be measured in the context of the world: whether it's good-looking or bad looking, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you need out in the world or not. You're simply with the body in and of itself on its own terms.

Ardent, alert, and mindful: Ardency is what carries the process of right effort into the practice. You really want to do this skillfully. *Alert* means you're watching what you're doing, paying close attention to what you're doing and the results that you're getting from your actions. And of course you're mindful, keeping the body in mind.

Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: This means that any time you want to switch your frame reference back to the world, you try to remind yourself: No. You don't want anything out of that. You're not going to let the issues of the world get you worked up. You're going to stay right here with your original frame of reference—i.e., the body in and of itself—and then try to carry that frame of reference into all your activities. Instead of jumping to other frames of reference, you stay with this one, with a sense of the body. As you're sitting here watching the breath, when you get up, walk around, try to keep the body in mind all the time. And be alert to how the breath feels. Anything else that may come up, whether it's a thought or a feeling, or an interaction: Try to see how it relates to the body.

This is how you strengthen your frame of reference and turn it into an object of concentration. In other words, when you're talking with someone else, notice how your body is reacting during the talking. When you're working, notice how your body is reacting, how the breath is reacting during the working. Always refer things back to the breath. That way, your frame of reference becomes really established. And you start getting insights you wouldn't have seen otherwise.

That's because establishing the body here as your frame of reference helps to keep the mind inside instead of flowing out. Luang Puu Dune has a nice explanation of the first noble truth. He said that the mind that flows out to its objects is suffering. So you want to keep it inside.

And of course, what will happen is occasionally it will flow out, and maybe after time, you'll be able to see it flow out as you're not flowing along with it. It's as if one mental state is flowing out while the observer is staying right here with the body. When you don't go out with it, it stops. It goes out a little ways and just falters.

That's an important insight: the realization that you can observe states of mind without getting entangled with them. That's the point where you can start using other frames of reference. Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you're staying with the breath, you've got all four frames of reference right there. There's the feeling that's associated with the breath. There's the mind state that's trying to maintain concentration. And then there are the various mental qualities, either the hindrances that are coming in to interfere with your concentration or the factors for awakening or the factors of jhāna that are helping you along.

You really want to make use of all four frames. Staying with the body helps you observe feelings, helps you observe the mind and mental qualities without getting sucked in by them.

This is why the meditation begins with the breath. When Buddha gave instructions on how you could develop concentration in a way that brings to fruition all four establishings of mindfulness, he said to stay with the breath. As you stay with the breath, you focus on the breath in ways that deal with feelings, that deal with the mind, that deal with mental qualities, but you never really leave the breath. You simply train yourself to observe things in conjunction with the breath.

So of all the various places you could establish mindfulness, the breath is the most important. It's the most crucial, the one that you really want work on the most.

There's a passage in the texts where the Buddha says you can focus on the body internally or externally or both internally or externally. This fits into a pattern that we see many times in the teachings: that when you look at yourself, you want to also remind yourself that whatever is true about the inner workings of your mind or the body is true about everybody else. This helps put things into perspective. When you're having trouble with your hindrances, remind yourself that you're not the only one. Other people have trouble with the hindrances as well. When you have pain in the body, remind yourself that everybody else has pains in the body.

This follows the pattern on the night of the Buddha's awakening. He first started with knowledge about his own past, his own stories. And if you think you're carrying around a lot of stories with you, imagine what it was like being

able to remember back many eons, all the stories the Buddha could have carried around. But he didn't carry them around. He just watched them. He observed them.

His next question was: Does this truth apply only to me or to other people? And what's the principle that determines how you go from one life to the next? So in the second watch of the night, he inclined his mind to the passing away and rebirth of all beings, people dying and being reborn on all different kinds of levels of the cosmos. And, seeing the larger picture in this way, he saw a larger pattern: that the nature of your actions is what determines where you get reborn. Skillful actions, done under the influence of right view, lead to a good rebirth. Unskillful ones, done under the influence of wrong view, lead to a bad rebirth. That's the general principle.

So notice that the Buddha started out with himself, then moved to other beings, before he finally he got to the third insight, which was to focus directly on the present moment in and of itself. Looking at the larger picture before focusing on the present may seem like a detour but it's an important maneuver for putting things into perspective. Otherwise, as you're sitting here meditating, you face your problems and it seems as if you're the only one sitting here in pain or the only one sitting with distraction. So it's good to remind yourself that everybody goes through this. No matter how bad the pain, there have been people who've sat through worse pain and yet came out on the other side. So these contemplations—of your body and other people's bodies—seem to be designed put things into perspective, as an aid to putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

All of this is designed to put the mind in position where it's ready to settle down. The mindfulness and alertness protect the mind, provide a good foundation. The quality of ardency is what helps make it skillful. And when you reflect on the universality of suffering, it gives you the right motivation for practicing. So all these qualities together get you ready to settle down and stay really solidly with the breath.

That's what right mindfulness is all about. It's not simply a matter of observing what arises and passes away, and just letting it arise, and letting it pass away. Mindfulness is not so much about allowing—it's about directing the mind in a skillful direction, toward right concentration. So as you're observing things arising and passing away, whether of body or the mind, it's not just a matter of being a passive observer. You want to observe them so that you understand them. And you want to understand them so that you can gain some mastery over them, so that you can direct the states of mind and the issues that arise in the body in the

direction of right concentration.

For instance, if there are pains in the body, what can you do, how can you relate to the pains in such a way that they don't knock the concentration off course? How do you breathe in a way that helps spread some pleasure around in the body? What attitudes do you develop toward what's going on in the body and the mind to help get yourself over difficult patches? That's what you want to keep in mind.

So mindfulness practice is not only a matter of having the right place to focus your attention. It also requires remembering the right attitude, the attitude that comes from right effort: the desire to do things skillfully and to let go of unskillful habits. When you have that attitude in charge, then the mindfulness does become right mindfulness, the kind of mindfulness that brings all the factors of path together.